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Baker-Polito Administration Highlights Housing Choice Bill in Worcester

Local leaders endorse legislation that aims to support communities statewide in their goals to increase new housing production

WORCESTER – Today, Governor Charlie Baker, Lt. Governor Karyn Polito and Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Mike Kennealy joined Worcester City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr., City Councilor Candy F. Mero-Carlson, local business, health care, and education leaders and state legislators to highlight *An Act to Promote Housing Choices*, [legislation filed by Governor Baker in February](#) that calls for targeted zoning reform to advance new housing production in Massachusetts and support the Administration's goal to produce 135,000 new housing units by 2025.

Today's event at Edge at Union Station, a transit-oriented, 82-unit student rental housing development that received \$1.7 million in Housing Development Incentive Program credits, celebrated Worcester's efforts to spur housing production, including allowing multifamily housing in several districts, inclusionary zoning that requires affordable units in certain new developments, the adoption of an Adaptive Reuse Overlay district to allow existing buildings to be converted into housing, and administering of a rehabilitation program through the housing office to preserve existing units in good condition. These efforts earned Worcester designation as a [Housing Choice Community in 2018](#).

Leaders from UMass Memorial Health Care, Quinsigamond Community College, Realtor Association of Central Massachusetts and the Pawtucket Red Sox joined the

city in endorsing the Housing Choice bill. On May 14th, the Joint Committee on Housing heard testimony from state and local officials and advocates, including support from the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce.

“Our administration has worked hard to address Massachusetts’ housing crisis with more than \$1 billion of investments in the affordable housing ecosystem while leveraging a variety of tools to advance thousands of new, market-rate units,” **said Governor Charlie Baker**. “We will continue to advocate for the passage of our Housing Choice legislation to modernize the Commonwealth’s zoning laws and deliver the housing necessary for families, workers and businesses to keep thriving.”

“I am happy to be here in Worcester to recognize a community that is demonstrating leadership on delivering housing to its residents, particularly at this critical juncture as statewide production of new units per year has fallen below half its 1980’s levels,” **said Lt. Governor Karyn Polito**. “Governor Baker and I believe strongly in encouraging best practices through targeted programs such as Housing Choice grants, and I congratulate Worcester on taking a proactive approach to the acute housing shortage facing our Commonwealth.”

The legislative proposal will enable cities and towns to adopt certain zoning best practices related to housing production by a simple majority vote, rather than the current two-thirds supermajority. While this legislation will lower the voting threshold to change zoning for all communities in the Commonwealth, it does not require cities and towns to make any of these changes. With the proposed simple majority threshold, municipalities that pursue rezoning efforts including those enabling transit-oriented or downtown-oriented new housing, would gain approval if they achieve more than 50 percent of the vote, as opposed to the current super majority of more than 66 percent. Massachusetts is currently one of only a few states to require a supermajority to change local zoning.

Zoning changes that promote best practices for housing growth that would qualify for the simple majority threshold include:

- Building mixed-use, multi-family, and starter homes, and adopting 40R “Smart Growth” zoning in town centers and near transit.
- Allowing the development of accessory dwelling units, or “in-law” apartments.
- Approving Smart Growth or Starter Homes districts that put housing near existing activity centers.
- Granting increased density through a special permit process.
- Allowing for the transfer of development rights and enacting natural resource protection zoning.

- Reducing parking requirements and dimensional requirements, such as minimum lot sizes.

This legislation also includes a provision, added by the Joint Committee on Housing last session, that would reduce the voting threshold for a special permit issued by a local permit granting authority to a simple majority vote, for certain multi-family or mixed-use projects with at least 10 percent affordable units in locations near transit or, in centers of commercial activity within a municipality.

“Massachusetts is home to the country’s best-educated workforce, but also its most expensive housing,” **said Housing and Economic Development Secretary Mike Kennealy**. “Our Housing Choice legislation would empower the production necessary to reduce housing costs, delivering relief to families while helping retain talent and securing economic growth. We look forward to working with our partners in the Legislature to make sure it passes this session.”

The legislation is part of the administration’s [Housing Choice Initiative](#), which provides incentives, technical assistance, and capital grant funding to encourage new housing production that meets the long-term needs of the Commonwealth’s growing, and aging, population. Worcester has received

“Our families, seniors, workforce, individuals with disabilities, and vulnerable populations have diverse housing needs, and today’s market is not meeting them. Housing that our residents can afford is a crucial resource and An Act to Promote Housing Choices will create the tools we need to promote new housing development for those across incomes,” **said Acting Undersecretary of Housing and Community Development Jennifer Maddox**. “We are proud of the coalition we’ve built in support of this legislation and the investments we’ve made in affordable housing, community development, and public housing to benefit the many communities which contribute to our strong, inclusive Commonwealth.”

“This proposed legislation allows for local flexibility in our zoning policies which is another tool in the toolbox,” **said Worcester City Manager Ed Augustus**. “We thank Governor Baker, Lieutenant Governor Polito, Secretary Kennealy and the entire Administration for prioritizing local decision making in its Housing Choice legislation.”

“The Governor’s Housing Choice bill does so much to encourage growth by reducing parking limits, increase density, and transit oriented development,” **said Worcester City Councilor Candy F. Mero-Carlson**. “The goal of this bill and the many others in the legislature right now is to address the conjoined issues of traffic congestion, a lack of construction outside of our urban centers, and of course housing affordability.”

“The City of Worcester is booming, and we are all rightfully proud of the tremendous strides our city has made in recent years,” **said Eric Dickson, MD, President and CEO of UMass Memorial Health Care.** “But with growth comes challenges. We at UMass Memorial recognize that many of our patients struggle to find affordable housing that is safe and healthy. This is due in part to rent increases and a limited supply of available properties. With this new legislation, which calls for increasing construction of both market rate and affordable housing, the Housing Choice Act will be instrumental in alleviating housing insecurity in our city. It is also a great opportunity for all of us here to rally around a cause that will uplift our neighbors.”

“At Quinsigamond Community College, students frequently mention housing as a barrier to their education, with some having to choose between paying the rent and taking classes,” **said Luis Pedraja, President of Quinsigamond Community College.** “*An Act to Promote Housing Choices* is the right bill at the right time to add much needed housing inventory to our community. Worcester’s tremendous growth, and its future, will rely on our ability to attract and retain future leaders to the area where they can live, learn, and work.”

“Worcester is a great place to live and work but there aren’t enough homes to meet the demand,” **said Tracey Fiorelli, President, Realtor Association of Central Massachusetts.** “The housing choice act is the type of program that can help us start producing the housing we desperately need in a collaborative and effective way.”

“We are thrilled to be joining the vibrant communities of Worcester and Central Massachusetts, and stand fully behind the Housing Choice legislation,” **said Dan Rea, EVP of Real Estate Development and Business Affairs for the Pawtucket Red Sox.** “Empowering Worcester to expand its housing stock will ensure residents and businesses have the opportunity to be part of an exciting live/work/play area, and help us realize our vision of Polar Park as part of a bustling downtown for decades to come.”

“The number one concern we hear from our 2,000+ members at the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce is access to and retention of a skilled workforce,” **said Vaske Gjino of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce,** who had previously testified in support of Housing Choice on May 14th. “At current rates, our housing supply will not keep up with our growth in employment and population. We believe it is critical for the workforce in our community to have access to a housing stock that is diverse and affordable to a wide range of income levels.”

“Massachusetts currently has some of the highest costs for housing in the country which makes it harder for families to pursue their housing goals,” **said Senator Michael O. Moore.** “Supporting the growth of an expanded housing market, and

helping to ensure families have a place to call home, is critical to local economic development and the revitalization of neighborhoods. Thank you to the Administration, and to officials in the City of Worcester, for their ongoing support and prioritization of housing initiatives here in heart of our Commonwealth.”

“In the City of Worcester and across the Commonwealth, we see that the existing housing stock is no longer meeting the demands of our growing economy and communities,” **said Representative Mary Keefe**. “By providing new tools and capital incentives for municipalities, the Housing Choice Initiative sets us on the right path to address housing shortages. I look forward to continue working with City officials, the Baker administration, and my colleagues in the Massachusetts Legislature to ensure that housing production remains affordable and accessible to all who need it.”

“Housing Choice supports our growing economy and population by providing more affordable and sustainable housing options for residents, while simultaneously supporting the environment,” **said Representative James O’Day**. “I am proud that Worcester has been a leader in housing development, and I will continue to support initiatives that make housing a priority in our community. Access to affordable housing provides a family with the security and stability necessary to pursue education and career goals, which supports their ability to lead full, productive lives.”

The Baker-Polito Administration has shown a deep commitment to increasing the production of housing across income levels. Since 2015, the administration has invested more than \$1 billion in affordable housing, resulting in the production and preservation of more than 17,000 housing units, including 15,000 affordable units. [In 2018, Governor Baker signed the largest housing bond bill](#) in Massachusetts history, committing more than \$1.8 billion to the future of affordable housing production and preservation. The Baker-Polito Administration has also advanced the development of more than 11,000 mixed-income housing units through the successful [MassWorks Infrastructure Program](#), reformed the [Housing Development Incentive Program](#), and worked with communities to implement smart-growth development and planning efforts.

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